**Background on the Boston Tea Party**[[1]](#footnote--1)

Tea was adored and esteemed not just in Great Britain but also in her overseas dominions. Tea was taxed in America as part of the hated Townshend duties. In 1770, these duties were repealed on everything but tea in what proved to be a fatal misjudgment. They were kept on tea partly to remind colonists of their subjugation to the crown and partly to help the East India Company out of a deep and sudden hole. The company had become hopelessly overextended. It had accumulated seventeen million pounds of tea—a huge amount of a perishable product—and, perversely, had tried to create an air of well-being by paying out more in dividends than it could really afford. Bankruptcy loomed unless it could reduce its stockpiles.
Hoping to ease it through the crisis, the British government gave the company an effective monopoly on tea sales in America. Every American knows what happened next.

On December 16, 1773, a group of eighty or so colonists dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded British ships in Boston Harbor, broke open 342 tea chests, and dumped the contents overboard. That sounds like a fairly moderate act of vandalism. In fact, it was a year’s supply of tea for Boston, with a value of £18,000, and so it was a grave and capital offense, and everyone involved knew so. Nobody at the time, incidentally, called it the Boston Tea Party; that name wasn’t first used until 1834.

Nor could the behavior of the crowds be characterized as one of good-natured high spirits, as we Americans rather like to think. The mood was murderously ugly. The unluckiest person in all this was a British customs agent named John Malcolm. Malcolm had recently been hauled from a house in Maine and tarred and feathered, a blisteringly painful punishment that involved the application of hot tar to bare skin. Usually, the tar was applied with stiff brushes, which were painful enough in themselves, though in at least one instance the victim was simply held by his ankles and dunked headfirst into a barrel of tar. To the coating of tar was added handfuls of feathers before the victim was paraded through the streets; often victims were beaten or even hanged.

So there was nothing at all jovial about tarring and feathering, and we can only imagine Malcolm’s dismay that December day as he was hauled wriggling from his house a second time and given another “Yankee jacket,” as it was also known. Once the tar dried, it took days of delicate picking and scrubbing to remove it. Malcolm sent a square of charred and blackened epidermis back to England with a note asking if he could please come home. His wish was granted. Meanwhile, however, America and Britain were implacably on the road to war. The first shots were fired fifteen months later. As a versifier of the day noted:

*What discontents, what dire events,*

*From trifling things proceed?*

*A little Tea, thrown in the Sea,*

*Has thousands caused to bleed.*

1. Bryson, Bill (2010-10-05). At Home: A Short History of Private Life (p. 182-183). Random House, Inc.. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)